

STEENS MOUNTAIN TRAIL MAINTENANCE
ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

EA OR-027-01-15

Bureau of Land Management
Burns District Office
HC 74-12533 Hwy 20 West
Hines, Oregon 97738

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CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTION: PURPOSE OF AND NEED FOR ACTION

A. Location of Project

The proposed action would take place on various foot and pack trails within the Steens Mountain Wilderness, approximately 60 miles south of Burns, Oregon. Legal descriptions for each area are given below.

Little Blitzen Gorge Trail: Portions of T. 33 S., R. 32 $\frac{3}{4}$ E., Sections 24, 26, 27, and 33; T. 33 S., R. 33 E., Sections 8, 9, and 10.

Big Indian Gorge Trail: Portions of T. 34 S., R. 32 $\frac{3}{4}$ E., Section 2; T. 33 S., R. 32 $\frac{3}{4}$ E., Sections 35 and 36; T. 33 S., R. 33 E., Sections 20, 21, and 22.

Wildhorse Canyon Trail: Portions of T. 33 S., R. 33 E., Section 35.

B. Purpose of and Need for Action

The purpose of the proposal is to remove safety hazards from selected foot and pack trails within the identified sections of the wilderness in the interest of public health and safety. The trails have long existed and were already in place when the areas became designated wilderness. With the increase in recreation use, if not minimally maintained, these trails may locally become unsafe. In addition, minimal maintenance would correct resource damage already occurring, including development of social trails to avoid obstacles, braided paths due to erosion, and improper trail maintenance by users, particularly damage to live trees and other vegetation. Work would be accomplished in the summer months by small work groups of one to six people, with individual sections of trail being maintained (1 to 7 miles) for 1 to 5 days at a time, approximately three or four times a season or until the project is completed.

The need for the proposal is to prevent hazards to visitors and to correct resource damage.

C. Conformance with Land Use Plans

The proposed action is in conformance with the provisions of the Wilderness Act of 1964, 43 CFR 6300, and Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Manual 8560, Management of Designated Wilderness Areas (1983). In reference to the latter document, the proposed action corresponds to §.31 B (1) which states that facilities and improvements, including trails, “may be provided only where they are the minimum necessary to protect the wilderness resource and for the health and safety of the visitor.” The proposed action also conforms to the provisions within Public Law 100-557 (1988), the Omnibus Oregon Wild and Scenic Rivers Act of 1988, the Donner und Blitzen National Wild and Scenic River Management Plan (1993), and the Andrews Management Framework Plan, Step II, Recreation (1983).

D. Major Issues

The Steens Mountain Wilderness was designated on October 30, 2000, through passage of the Steens Mountain Cooperative Management and Protection Act of 2000. The three areas affected by this proposal previously were included in the High Steens Wilderness Study Area (WSA) (OR-2-85F) and the Little Blitzen Gorge WSA (OR-2-86F).

Wilderness areas are subject to stringent management constraints as described in the Wilderness Act and subsequent laws. All projects occurring in wilderness areas must be carried out in accordance with these constraints to preserve wilderness values.

CHAPTER II. ALTERNATIVES INCLUDING THE PROPOSED ACTION

A. Proposed Action

The proposed action involves the removal of deadfall from selected trails wherever such debris constitutes a potential threat to safe passage by hikers or horses, and where users are creating social trails to avoid these obstacles. Cutting of low, overhead branches would be necessary in places where they obstruct the trail. Brushy vegetation on either side of the trails would be cut back. Eroded sections of trail would be repaired by digging additional trail tread or by filling in with rocks. Existing water drains would be cleared and new water drains constructed where necessary. To correct erosion problems in Wildhorse Canyon, up to five new switchbacks would be constructed, utilizing existing trail wherever possible. Multiple paths on all trails would be camouflaged by using deadfall and debris. Stepping stones would be placed in boggy areas, and/or short trail sections would be rerouted to reduce and minimize resource damage.

Trail maintenance would be performed only when necessary to protect public safety and to prevent resource damage on trails that receive recreational use during the summer and fall months. The trails would be maintained in primitive condition, with trail width remaining less than 24 inches.

Only modest tool use is anticipated. Hand tools that would be needed in some areas include shovels, McLeods, rakes, hand saws, axes, pulaskis, grubbers, and nippers. No motorized or mechanized equipment would be used. Cut material would be scattered out of view of trail users. No bridges or other developments would be constructed.

In Little Blitzen Gorge the trail would be maintained to the Wet Blanket Springs drainage and in Big Indian Canyon to the terminus of the Desert Trail route that comes down from the north rim. In Wildhorse Canyon, the trail would only be maintained to the lake. This would retain the relatively trailless portions of each canyon.

B. No Action

Under this alternative, no trail maintenance would occur.

CHAPTER III. DESCRIPTION OF THE AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT

A. Critical Elements

The following critical elements of the human environment either are not present or would not be impacted by the proposed action or the no action alternatives: air quality, prime or unique farmlands, floodplains, environmental justice, hazardous materials, American Indian religious concerns, threatened and endangered animals, threatened and endangered plants, and paleontology.

The following critical elements are present and may be affected by either alternative: water quality, wetlands and riparian zones, Areas of Critical Environmental Concern (ACECs), Wild and Scenic Rivers, cultural heritage, wilderness, noxious weeds, and migratory birds.

The following noncritical elements would be affected by either alternative: recreation, vegetation, visual resources, and soils.

1. Water Quality

The normal runoff pattern on Steens Mountain is characterized by high flows in the spring with low flows during the remainder of the year. Water quality in the area varies greatly depending on topography, elevation, proximity to spring sources, climate, and other factors such as depth of snowpack. Of the streams in the project area, only one, the Little Blitzen River, was listed by the State of Oregon as “water quality limited” (June 1996). The parameter limiting quality was summer temperature. Though recreation has been determined to be a cause of point-source pollution in the Oregon Statewide Assessment of Nonpoint Sources of Water Pollution Report (1988), data attributing water quality problems to this source for the project area is not available.

2. Wetlands and Riparian Zones

Riparian areas are water-dependent systems bordering streams, rivers, and wetlands. In the project area, wetlands include wet meadows, lakeshores, and bogs. The quality of streamside riparian has been evaluated in the project area using three methods: Proper Functioning Condition (PFC), riparian condition, and trend.

The current riparian condition has been determined to be “Good” in the project area for Little Blitzen, Wildhorse, and Big Indian Creeks, with trends of “Up” and “Static” depending on stream segment. The segments affected by the proposed action were determined to be in PFC.

3. Areas of Critical Environmental Concern

Three ACECs exist in the project area: Steens Mountain ACEC (56,187 acres), Little Blitzen ACEC/Research Natural Area (RNA) (2,530 acres), and Rooster Comb ACEC (716 acres). The Steens Mountain ACEC was designated for scenic qualities including Wildhorse and Little Wildhorse Lakes; subalpine ecosystems; and pristine, high gradient streams. Relevant and important values for Little Blitzen ACEC/RNA, which is located within the Steens Mountain ACEC, include plant community types and unique assemblages of rare plants as well as several Special Status plant species. This area was designated to protect several terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems including alpine communities, a mid-to-high elevation vernal pond, and a stream system originating in the subalpine zone. The Rooster Comb ACEC is located entirely within the Steens Mountain ACEC, with primary resource values of mountain mahogany/bluebunch wheatgrass and black cottonwood/ riparian

plant communities.

4. Wild and Scenic Rivers

Big Indian, Little Blitzen, and Wildhorse Creeks are designated as components of the National Wild and Scenic Rivers system. Rivers classified as “Wild” under this system are generally inaccessible except by trail, and are meant to represent vestiges of primitive America. Outstanding Remarkable Values (ORVs) or features contributing substantially to the river setting or ecosystem were determined to be scenic, geologic, recreational, fish and wildlife, vegetation, and cultural.

5. Cultural Resources

Prior to Euroamerican settlement, the project area was occupied and used by Northern Paiute bands. Prehistoric cultural resources within the project area include lithic scatters and other types of sites. Historic cultural resources in the area include several old cabins and remains of corrals. A short portion of the Little Blitzen trail passes through the Riddle Brothers Ranch National Historic District.

6. Wilderness Values

The Steens Mountain Wilderness is 174,753 acres in size and is composed of diverse topographical and geological features, including glacier-carved canyons, sagebrush flats, and rocky benches. Vegetation ranges from low sagebrush to high alpine species. Stands of aspen, cottonwood, and juniper are found throughout most portions of the wilderness.

a. Naturalness

The portions of the Steens Mountain Wilderness that would be affected by the proposed action are in outstanding natural condition. The very few unnatural features include historic cabins, corral remnants, and portions of old fences. Glacial cirques, high mountain lakes, ponds, streams, diverse fauna, and a variety of physical features caused by vulcanism, faulting, glaciation, and erosional processes are all found in an unaltered condition.

b. Solitude

Opportunities for solitude are enhanced by the varied and rugged topography. Vegetative screening also increases opportunities for solitude in some areas, particularly Little Blitzen and Big Indian Gorges, where aspen, willow, and other riparian species provide screening near the creeks.

c. Primitive and Unconfined Recreation

Primitive and unconfined recreation is defined as “nonmotorized types of outdoor recreation activities that do not require developed facilities” (Bureau of Land Management 8560.0-5, Management of Designated Wilderness Areas).

Opportunities for primitive and unconfined recreation are outstanding and include day hiking, backpacking, horseback riding, hunting, fishing, and photography.

d. Supplemental Wilderness Values

Special features enhancing the area’s wilderness values include geology, vegetation, wildlife, and scenic qualities. Historical values, including the remains of old homesteads, can be found in Little Blitzen and Big Indian Gorges.

7. Noxious Weeds

Weed inventories of the project area have located small populations of Canada and Bull thistle, primarily in the Kueny Corral area of Little Blitzen Gorge and in the first one-half mile of the Little Blitzen trail. There is no weed-free hay requirement and additional weed species may be found during later surveys.

8. Migratory Birds

More than 70 species of migratory birds are known to pass through or breed and nest in the area of the proposed projects. Some species documented in surveys include yellow warbler, yellow-rumped warbler, warbling vireo, Brewer's sparrow, chipping sparrow, American robin, rock wren, canyon wren, western wood pewee, downy woodpecker, hairy woodpecker, willow flycatcher, gray flycatcher, dusky flycatcher, western meadowlark, red-winged blackbird, brown-headed cowbird, Brewer's blackbird, mourning dove, and many other songbird species, migratory shorebirds, waterfowl, and raptors.

B. Noncritical Elements

1. Recreation

Recreation activities in Little Blitzen and Big Indian Gorges include backpacking, hunting, day hiking, fishing, horseback riding, permitted outfitter use, sightseeing, and photography.

Recreation uses in Wildhorse Canyon include limited backpacking and extensive day hiking and fishing. Most visitors do not hike past the lake. The rugged terrain precludes horse use in the upper sections of the canyon. Hybrid Lahontan cutthroat trout are present in Wildhorse Lake as a result of historic fish stocking. Stocking no longer continues, but fishing is a popular activity in the lake.

The major portions of all three trails were never actually constructed and resulted from people following old livestock paths or seeking the easiest way to their destinations. In Big Indian Gorge, portions of the existing trail were a jeep trail until the canyon was closed to vehicular use.

2. Vegetation

All three areas proposed for trail maintenance contain a wide variety of vegetation, with some species widely distributed and others restricted to small, isolated areas. Riparian vegetation, including black cottonwood, quaking aspen, mountain alder, willows, creek dogwood, and western juniper, occurs within most of the drainages and near springs in Little Blitzen and Big Indian Gorges. The high rim areas are characterized by subalpine type grassland. Several Special Status plant species known to exist in the subalpine area include Cusick's hyssop, Steens paintbrush, Hayden's cymopterus, Cusick's

draba, and Davidson's penstemon.

3. Visual Resources

All wilderness areas are classified as Visual Resource Management (VRM) Class I. In these areas, management objectives are to preserve the existing character of the landscape. This VRM class provides for natural ecological changes and limited management activity is allowed. The level of landscape change should be very low and must not attract attention.

4. Soils

The soils within the Little Blitzen and Big Indian River corridors are derived from the Steens Mountain Basalt which is about 16.4 million years old. The soils in the valley bottoms, where trail maintenance activities would occur, are generally deep (40 to 60 inches) to very deep (greater than 60 inches) and somewhat poorly to well drained. In the Wildhorse area, the soils are generally shallow to moderately deep and are well drained.

Additional information on the affected environment can be found in the Wilderness Study Report (BLM-OR-EA-91-43-8561.6, 1991), the Draft Southeastern Oregon Resource Management Plan (1998), the Donner und Blitzen Wild and Scenic River Plan (1993) and the Steens Mountain Recreation Area Management Plan (1985).

CHAPTER IV. ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES

A. Proposed Action

1. Critical Elements

a. Water Quality

Where portions of the trail are eroding into the creeks, grubbing of new trail tread would have short-term impacts to water quality. Displaced soil could drift into the water system during the trail rehabilitation process. Over the long term, the proposed action would benefit water quality by curtailing currently occurring erosion caused by the passage of foot and horse traffic. Without trail maintenance, additional erosion could occur from user-created paths.

b. Wetlands and Riparian Zones

With the placement of natural appearing stepping stones over wet areas and reroutes away from boggy areas, the impact of visitor traffic to riparian zones would be lessened and water drainage patterns would improve. The rerouting of trails to avoid wet areas would decrease impacts to riparian vegetation.

c. Areas of Critical Environmental Concern

Since most of the proposed action takes place on existing trails, the relevant and important values for which these ACECs were established would not be affected. Trail reroutes where erosion is occurring in Wildhorse Canyon would be performed so as to avoid any rare or sensitive plant communities. The sections where proposed work would occur lie in rocky areas.

d. Wild and Scenic Rivers

The proposed action would not have an adverse or a beneficial effect on Wild and Scenic Rivers, since the ORVs and features found to contribute substantially to the river system or ecosystem for which each section was designated would not be affected.

e. Cultural Resources

Due to the existence of cultural sites along the river and stream corridors, impacts to cultural resources could occur. In order to avoid impacts, archaeological surveys would be performed on sections where trail reroutes are proposed. Long-term benefits to cultural resources could occur, since the trail would avoid known sites.

f. Wilderness Values

(1) Naturalness

Since maintenance would occur on existing trails, no new unnatural features would be added. The new switchbacks on the Wildhorse Lake trail would be easily seen from a distance; however, the existing multiple paths are also visible.

Overall, natural values would be enhanced by consolidation of multiple paths into one trail, rehabilitation of social trails around obstacles, reduction of erosion, and correction of improper maintenance.

(2) Solitude

The proposed action would be limited to local maintenance of existing trails. Opportunities for solitude would be temporarily disrupted by the presence of the work crew. With the exception of limbing and brushing of vegetation, opportunities for solitude offered by vegetative screening would still exist. Large stands of cottonwood, aspen, and mountain mahogany would not be affected. Topographical screening would not be affected.

(3) Primitive and Unconfined Recreation

Primitive and unconfined recreation opportunities would be enhanced by trail maintenance. Trails free of hazards would allow the public to safely access areas of interest to backpack, horseback ride, and recreate. Minimally maintained trails may attract some additional visitors who would otherwise not utilize the area. This could displace those users who dislike seeing other people. However, trails would only be maintained in a primitive condition and only to the degree necessary to provide for human health, safety, and protection of wilderness values. In Wildhorse Canyon, trail work would only occur in the middle section of trail, leaving the rest of the trail in its current primitive condition. Current trailless areas near the glacial cirques in Little Blitzen and Big Indian would be preserved.

(4) Supplemental Values

The supplemental values of scenic, geologic, historical, and vegetative qualities would not be affected by the proposed action except in some site-specific areas. An appearance of local maintenance would occur due to brushing of vegetation and cutting of overhead limbs.

To minimize these effects, cuts would be flush with tree trunks and cut vegetation would be scattered off the trail and out of view of the casual observer. Where limbing activities are most apparent, soil would be brushed on the cut ends for an aged appearance.

g. Noxious Weeds

Improved visitor access could allow for increased distribution and colonization of noxious weed species in certain locations. Soil disturbance from trail maintenance projects could allow for more hospitable growing conditions for certain types of weeds. To avoid future infestations, weed surveys would be conducted in the project area following trail work. The Burns Weed Management Plan would be followed to prevent spread of undesirable species.

h. Migratory Birds

Impacts to migratory birds would occur if the projects are conducted during the nesting season (June 1–July 15), which could cause adults to abandon nests. The amount of work on trails described would probably flush adults from nests but would not be long enough in duration to cause abandonment. Scattering of cut vegetation would have only a temporary impact on migratory birds. Work projects would not be scheduled until after July 15 to avoid the above impacts.

Increased visitor use from improved trails would impact species nesting near the trails and near camp sites in the riparian areas. Most species would abandon nests with increased disturbance and possibly reneest in other suitable habitat. The amount of disturbance would depend on the actual increase in use and is difficult to quantify at this time.

The combining of extra social trails into one main trail would decrease the amount of migratory bird habitat disturbed.

2. Noncritical Elements

a. Recreation

Maintenance of existing trails would facilitate easier access to the canyon areas due to removal of deadfall and brushing of trailside vegetation. The experience of those users who previously were discouraged by difficult passage in these areas would be enhanced. The proposed action could bring more visitors to the canyons, which may displace some users. Visitor safety would be enhanced by erosion control measures. Visitor experiences would be enhanced by removal of multiple paths and correction of improper maintenance practices, resulting in a more natural appearance.

b. Vegetation

Direct effects to vegetation would be restricted to those areas where overhanging branches from nearby trees require cutting to maintain safe clearance and where brushy vegetation would be trimmed back. Local breakage or cutting of some plants could occur as deadfall or other debris on trails are cast aside. Tree limbs would be cut back at the trunk to avoid future insect infestation. Botanical clearances would be performed in areas scheduled for rerouting to determine if any sensitive plant communities are present. None of the trees or shrubs in the gorges are Special Status species.

c. Visual Resources

Impacts to visual resources would occur where a) cutting of overhanging or brushy vegetation would be done for trail clearance, b) large tree limbs and trunks would be cut into smaller pieces for removal, c) new switchbacks would be constructed in Wildhorse Canyon; and d) existing water drains would be cleared of debris. All these activities would render the trails more visible and create a local appearance of maintenance. All cut material would be disposed of and scattered out of view of the trail. Fresh cuts would be camouflaged with soil or with gray primer spray paint. The VRM Class I objectives would be met.

d. Soils

Some disturbance to soils would occur during the Wildhorse trail reroute and in site-specific areas where grubbing is needed to correct eroded sections of trail. Soils would be disturbed where existing water drains are cleared to facilitate water dispersal off the trail, and where new water drains would be constructed. Consolidating existing multiple paths into one would lessen current impacts to soil.

3. Cumulative Impacts

There would be no known cumulative impacts on vegetation, water quality, cultural heritage, Wild and Scenic Rivers, migratory birds, soils, ACECs, and visual resources.

a. Wetlands and Riparian Zones

There are 104 miles of Wild and Scenic Rivers within the wilderness, as well as several miles of perennial and ephemeral streams. This project would occur within approximately 15 miles of a riparian corridor. Historically, foot and stock passage through wet and boggy areas has contributed to noticeable impacts, including expansion of these areas as people seek to avoid them. This expansion would be discontinued as trails were properly rerouted, allowing these areas to heal over time and normal water flow would be reestablished. Rerouting of trails would lessen the impact on those specific locations where foot and stock passage are causing damage. Overall, impacts to wetlands and riparian zones would be lessened throughout the wilderness.

b. Wilderness

The proposed action would take place within a wilderness area where previous humanmade impacts to the environment have been minimal. Although the existence of a trail is an unnatural, humanmade feature in the landscape; it already exists and in many cases is being expanded into several parallel paths. In certain areas, an appearance of maintenance could contribute to a loss of naturalness, but proposed mitigation measures, including camouflaging of cut limbs, would lessen this impact.

As users are better able to pass through the area, improper cutting of limbs and trees would cease and those areas with an unnatural appearance due to this cutting would no longer be visible. Consolidation of multiple paths and correction of foot and stock expansion of boggy areas would increase naturalness throughout this portion of the wilderness. As a result, impacts to naturalness throughout the wilderness as a whole from existing humanmade features would be lessened. Of the 174,753 wilderness acres, approximately 3.6 would be affected by trail maintenance.

c. Noxious Weeds

An overall increase in weed colonization could occur from soil disturbance from these projects and from additional horse and pedestrian traffic. Any new weed infestation, in addition to the small, existing weed population, would contribute to the spread of exotic plants throughout the project area and would allow for seed sources for new populations if left unchecked. However, the Burns District Weed Plan would be implemented so there would be no cumulative effect.

d. Recreation

Of the 496,135 acres within the Steens Mountain Cooperative Management and Protection Area (CMPA) available for recreation activities, approximately 3.6 would be affected by trail maintenance. Proposed actions would allow existing recreational use to continue while lessening impacts to the riparian environment and decreasing impacts from soil erosion into water sources. Some users may be attracted to these areas due to improved access, but allowing for one maintained trail and consolidating multiple paths would better accommodate the projected increase in visitation through safer trails and by keeping users to one path instead of dispersing use on several trails. Because trails would only be maintained in a primitive condition, a large visitor increase is not anticipated, though it could be one of the contributory factors in combination with increased media attention. Long-term impacts to wetlands, riparian areas, and water quality from foot and stock passage on existing improperly placed trails would be lessened.

Proposed mitigation measures, including delaying the start of trail work until after nesting season, reroutes around cultural sites and wet areas, and correcting eroded areas, would lessen recreational use impacts more so than existing conditions. Visitor safety would be enhanced through less hazardous trails, while the majority of the CMPA would remain available for those users who enjoy off-trail travel. Maintaining the trails in a primitive condition, and only where needed to correct resource damage and to provide for human health and safety, would retain the pristine and wild environment of the area.

B. No Action Alternative

1. Critical Elements

a. Water Quality

Long-term impacts to water quality would occur in specific locations with no trail maintenance. Continuing erosion in localized areas and user-created paths to avoid wet areas, could result in sedimentation from soils in the creeks.

b. Wetlands and Riparian Zones

With no trail maintenance, visitors would continue to travel through and around boggy areas. Successive paths to avoid wet areas would, in turn, become filled with water, especially in low-lying areas such as Kueny Corral. Packstock would continue to churn large holes in muddy areas. Over time, as these portions of the trail become impassible, these sections could be abandoned as visitors pioneer new paths into the uplands. Avoidance of these areas would allow the wetlands to heal.

The vast majority of overnight camping occurs in riparian zones. With no trail maintenance, users who found the trails difficult would be displaced to other areas on the mountain. Dispersed use can result in more impacted areas; however, it is difficult to estimate how much of this type of use would occur. Riparian zones currently impacted by camping would be benefitted by dispersal. However, visitors could instead concentrate on a few, easily reached locations or could establish new trails and campsites in other riparian areas within the wilderness.

c. Areas of Critical Environmental Concern

Lack of trail maintenance would impact scenic quality of the Steens Mountain ACEC, Little Blitzen ACEC/RNA, and Rooster Comb ACEC due to the visual impacts of multiple paths and improper user maintenance. These impacts would only occur in specific areas and are not expected to adversely affect the ACEC as a whole. Visitors seeking new routes around obstacles could trample sensitive plant species in specific areas.

d. Wild and Scenic Rivers

Under this alternative, most of the ORVs and features found to contribute substantially to the river system or ecosystem for which each section was designated would continue. The ORVs of vegetation and recreation would be negatively affected through lack of access to visitors and from creation of multiple, widening paths, especially through wetland areas.

e. Cultural Resources

Those visitors attempting to hike and ride horses in the area could cause long-term impacts to sites through creation of new paths as the existing ones become too difficult to navigate. Additional discovery of new or existing sites and removal of artifacts could occur as visitors expand their trail routes.

f. Wilderness Values

(1) Naturalness

Naturalness would increase in some areas where vegetation would obliterate the trails. However, it is likely that visitors would still attempt to travel in the canyons. Their actions, including creation of new paths and physical removal of deadfall and debris, would have a long-term impact on the naturalness of those areas.

(2) Solitude

As trails become impassable over the long term, opportunities

for solitude would be enhanced due to fewer visitors.

However, in some areas, especially Wildhorse Canyon, visitors would begin to create new routes, and as these routes become more established, visitor use could increase, along with fewer opportunities for solitude.

(3) Primitive and Unconfined Recreation

Opportunities for primitive and unconfined recreation would decrease, except for those visitors who were willing and physically able to travel cross-country or on unmaintained routes.

(4) Supplemental Values

The supplemental values of geology, history, and wildlife would not be affected. The scenic quality would be affected in some localized areas where braided paths could occur, but these areas would not be visible to the observer except at close range and from overlooks on the rim. The one exception is in Wildhorse Canyon where the existing trail is already very visible from long distances. Vegetation would be affected in those areas where plant communities were disturbed by user-created paths.

g. Noxious Weeds

With no trail maintenance and associated soil disturbance, the likelihood of weed infestations would lessen over time, but would still be possible in certain low-elevation areas. Detection of existing weed populations would be more difficult with decreased access to the canyon areas.

h. Migratory Birds

Adult birds would not be flushed from nests as a result of trail maintenance activities, but would be disturbed by those visitors attempting to travel on nonmaintained or on new, pioneered routes. Although a proliferation of new routes would impact those birds nesting in areas that are presently not close to existing trails, it would not be of long enough duration to cause abandonment. A decrease in visitor use of the project area could result in less disturbance to birds nesting in riparian areas. However, the amount of disturbance depends on the

actual decrease in use.

2. Noncritical Elements

a. Recreation

Trails would naturally degrade with time as rock, deadfall, and brush gradually accumulate. Some accumulations could constitute public safety hazards where passage becomes restricted or blocked. Local additional disturbance may result as users seek alternate routes around hazards. Some trail users, especially those with pack horses, would continue to use saws and axes to clear the trails.

b. Vegetation

Lack of trail maintenance would allow unrestricted growth of vegetation, except in those areas where users would continue to use saws and axes to cut paths. Improper cutting of tree limbs could allow insect infestation and subsequent disease of affected juniper and cottonwood trees. User-created paths around deadfall would cause increased trampling of vegetation and loss of vegetative cover as paths widen.

c. Visual Resources

Lack of trail maintenance would allow vegetation to obliterate existing trails. Impacts to visual resources would be low, except in areas where recreation use would continue. Establishment of multiple paths, especially in eroded and wet areas, and improper trail maintenance by users would create visual impacts. These impacts would not be visible from a distance.

d. Soils

No surface disturbance of soils due to trail reconstruction would occur. Erosion would continue in areas where foot and horse traffic continues to break down the trail edge. Visitors creating new paths around obstacles would continue to create new surface disturbance in previously undisturbed areas.

3. Cumulative Impacts

There would be no known cumulative effects on water quality, ACECs, Wild and Scenic Rivers, cultural heritage, noxious weeds, migratory birds, vegetation, soils, and visual resources.

a. Wetlands and Riparian Zones

With no trail maintenance, existing trails would deteriorate, but a series of new paths could be created by users in their attempts to gain access to the wilderness. Over time, these paths, if improperly placed, could cause increased erosion, creek siltation, and expansion of boggy sections. In other, less accessible areas, lack of trail maintenance and the corresponding drop in levels of users could benefit specific riparian zones. The currently occurring damage to wet areas would continue in certain locations.

b. Wilderness

Naturalness would increase in some areas of the wilderness where access would become difficult. User-created paths would still allow access, and over time these paths could proliferate to avoid boggy areas, windfalls, and eroded sections. Trails are unnatural features in the landscape, and in combination with existing humanmade features already present, including corral and cabin remnants and fences, user-created paths would contribute to the overall loss of naturalness of the area and to the Steens Mountain Wilderness as a whole.

Generally, opportunities for solitude throughout the Steens Mountain Wilderness are outstanding due to varied topography and vegetation.

Due to lack of trail maintenance, visitor use is expected to decrease in certain portions of the project area. This decrease would add to the outstanding opportunities for solitude existing throughout the wilderness and would enhance these opportunities in the project area. However, in those areas that could still be easily accessed, solitude would be decreased due to a concentration of users. Creation of paths to avoid obstacles would disperse users throughout the landscape. Dispersal throughout the wilderness, rather than along one maintained trail, could increase the number of areas where visitors could expect to encounter other parties. This reduces the portion of the wilderness that offers opportunities for solitude.

c. Recreation

Although recreational use of the wilderness would probably decline with progressive deterioration of existing trails, the use would become concentrated in those areas where passage would still be available. Opportunities to recreate would be limited to those who are physically able to travel cross-country in these areas. Alternatively, a series of new paths could be created by users in their attempts to gain access to the wilderness. This dispersal of use would result in increased impacts at those sites not previously visited or were visited in smaller numbers. It would also detract from the recreational experiences of some visitors. Overall within the Steens Mountain Wilderness, there would be fewer opportunities for recreation activities for those visitors who prefer or require maintained trails.

CHAPTER V. CONSULTATION AND COORDINATION

A. Preparers and Reviewers

Mary Emerick, Wilderness Specialist/Lead Preparer
Gary Foulkes, Planning and Environmental Coordinator
Rick Hall, Natural Resource Specialist (Botanist)
Tim Kramer, Watershed Specialist
Brian McCabe, Archaeologist
Matt Obradovich, Wildlife Biologist
Mark Sherbourne, Natural Resource Specialist
Evelyn Treiman, Outdoor Recreation Planner
Cynthia Weston, Fisheries Biologist